Berita

Summer 2020

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Dominik M. Müller

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Malaysia/Singapore/Brunei Studies Group
Association for Asian Studies

Letter from the Chair

At this time last year, we were making plans for the Association for Asian Studies Conference to be held in Boston in March of 2020. We had been organizing special MSB activities to address Malaysia at 2020 with a focus on aspects of Mahathir Mohamad's Wawasan 2020 (Vision 2020) and the Malaysia that emerged since he coined the slogan, and his leadership of Pakatan Harapan since the surprising 2018 General Election in Malaysia.

Who could have guessed that in rapid succession, the month before the Conference, Malaysia would see the resignation of Mahathir Mohamad as Prime Minister on 24 February 2020, the rise of a new party **Perikatan Nasional,** and a new prime minister . . . and then the cancellation of the AAS Conference in March, a result of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. Our disappointment in not bringing together our group for these events and our annual business meeting—where we announce the winners of the two MSB awards, the John A. Lent Prize and the Ronald Provencher Travel Prize—and the loss of the engagement, insight, and connections that the annual conference provides us was enormous. We were left wondering what the rest of 2020 would bring—in the Singapore election, in the endlessly shifting political scene in Malaysia, and, as the pandemic continues, whether we will be able to meet again at the AAS 2021 Conference.

As I write, this year's Conference is anticipated to be "hybrid"—and the plan is to have both in-person and streaming sessions. On the positive side, this provides us with the opportunity to meet virtually with more scholars from the MSB region than perhaps ever before, some who, even in normal times, would otherwise not be able to travel because of time or financial limitations. Moreover, a hybrid program means a greater number of non-presenters can participate as listeners to virtual sessions. But as I will most likely be traveling, like many of you, "virtually" to the Conference, it comes with a real sense of loss, knowing many of us will miss the face-to-face collegiality with MSB members old and new that comes from the time we spend together every year. Please look out for information from me that lets you know that we'll still be meeting virtually as a group during the 2021 March Conference to conduct our annual business (which includes electing a new MSB chair for the coming three years!) and that we'll be providing you with information on panels that address MSB matters once the AAS announces the schedule.

Finally, we missed the opportunity last March to award our prizes, so please look in this issue of *Berita* for the write-up for the award-winning John A. Lent paper, which was presented to PhD historian Sandy Chang. The Provencher Travel Award, which provides funds for paper presenters traveling to the annual conference would have been awarded to Sarena Abdullah, Senior Lecturer at the School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia, who, like the rest of us, was forced to cancel her trip.

Hoping everyone is well.

Patricia Sloane-White, Chair, MSB Studies Group

And p.s. If you aren't a member of our **Official Malaysia, Singapore, Singapore Studies (MSB) Group**—at present nearly 700 people and organizations are—please visit us on Facebook and ask to join!

John A. Lent Prize 2020

The John A. Lent Prize is presented annually at the Association for Asian Studies Conference to the author of the Best Paper on Malaysia, Singapore, or Brunei Presented at the previous year's Association for Asian Studies Conference.

Because the AAS 2020 Conference was cancelled, the award and prize money were sent to Sandy Chang by post.

The judges for the 2019 John A. Lent Prize, Kikue Hamayotsu, Laura Elder, and chair Jeremy Lent have awarded the annual prize for the Best Paper presented at the previous year's Associaton for Asian Studies Conference to Sandy Chang, PhD Candidate in History at the University of Texas, Austin. for her paper, "Six Weddings and A Funeral: Marriage, Modernity, and Chinese Customary Law in the Straits Settlements, 1900s-1930s." The judges described Chang's paper as a compelling and well written work of social and legal history. Using court and government documents, newspaper reports, and oral interviews now held in archives in Singapore and the UK, Chang explores a single -- though widely reported -- court case from 1908 to explore "...how polygamy in the Straits Settlements served as a site upon which jurists and colonial reformers -- both British and Asian -- articulated and formulated ideals of Chinese marriage and modernity, as well as diasporic identity and imperial subjecthood."

In addressing such questions, Chang explores what she refers to as a "illogicality" of legal governance in the Straits Settlements, particularly in relation to marriage, as the colonial judiciary were free to adhere or overturn precedents relating to marriage law as it was applied to members of the Chinese community in the region. Such "illogicality" was exposed with the "Six Widows case" in 1908, during which competing ideas about spousal rights were openly debates following the death of the wealthy merchant Choo Eng Choon, and subsequent legal disputes over his estate. The case exposed the limits and inconsistencies of colonial understandings of Chinese marital customs and "Chineseness" itself. It also ignited wider attempts to legally standardize and "modernize" Chinese marriage in the Straits Settlements.

Chang's close reading of the "Six Widows Case" engages with a growing body of academic work on the gender and social history of the Straits Settlements as well as with the attempt to write the Straits Settlements back into the broader story of the British empire. She links debates in the late 19th and early 20th century Straits Settlements to parallel debates in India at the same time, for example. And her work also touches directly on growing scholarly

interest in notions of "Chineseness" under colonial governance. Finally, Chang does an admirable job of giving agency to the women involves in the "Six Widows Case" themselves. The judges and the executive board of the Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Studies Group warmly congratulate Sandy Chang for this outstanding paper.

Article

Pieter J. Veth on the Tabut Feast: Judaic and Persian-Shīʿī Traces of a Tradition in Java

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Introduction

One of the most popular transcultural topics discussed in the 19th century was *Tabut*, dedicated to the commemoration of the Death of Ḥusayn, the third Shīʿī Imam in Karbala, in Muḥarram and his older brother Ḥassan. One of the first ethnographic reports based on the observation of the ten days of Muḥarram (and ʿĀshūrā') in Sumatra, Indonesia was produced by a team of Dutch scholars including O. L. Helfrich (1860–1958), and his colleagues W. R. Winter and D. M. Schiff, also edited by the famous Dr Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936). As such, this piece could be viewed as one of the earliest ethnographic reports reflecting on Dutch accounts of the reception of alien religious teachings in the Archipelago. Helfrich was a government official for Besuki, Krui, Bengkulu, Aceh, and Palembang, and also a board member of the Instituut voor de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde van Nederlandsch-Indië. They published the article entitled "Het Hasan-Hosein of Taboet-feest te Bengkoelen" ('Ḥassan-Ḥusayn or Tabut Celebration in Benkoelen'), in *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*, a bimonthly and multilingual journal dedicated to the study of cultural, anthropological, and ethnological collections, in 1888. Their report, which my colleagues and I published in translation along with an introduction in 2015, comprehensively touched upon different aspects of the Tabut festival in Bengkulu.[2] This is a feast whose name and tradition were brought to the Archipelago through India, where "flimsy material tags" depicting the term Tabut/taboot are applied to representations of the tombs of Ḥusayn and Ḥassan which are carried about in the Muḥarram processions.[3]

[1] Although this is the first time that I have translated a Dutch text into English, it would have not been possible to finalize it without the kind and professional support of my colleagues Arnold Yasin Mol (Leiden) and Edwin P. Wieringa (Köln), who went through my work. Wieringa also introduced some important materials for which I am grateful.

[2] Majid Daneshgar, Faisal Ahmad Shah, and Arnold Yasin Mol, "Ashura in the Malay-Indonesian World: The Ten Days of Muḥarram in Sumatra as Depicted by Nineteenth-Century Dutch Scholars," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 8, no. 4 (2015): 491–505.

[3] Sir Henry Yule & Arthur Coke Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: Being a Glossary of Anglo- Indian Colloquial Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical, and Discursive* (London: John Murray, 1903), 887.

Regarding this report, Pieter Johannes Veth (1814–1895) wrote a short response elaborating on regional aspects of the Tabut feast in 1888. Veth was a well-known and prolific Dutch scholar, literary figure, geologist, ethnographer and scientist known for his encyclopedic knowledge and anti-imperial approach. He never visited the Dutch East Indies, but his studies, reviews and commentaries on the Malay-Indonesian world (particularly Java) were instrumental in enlightening the Dutch communities; allowing them to imagine Southeast Asia and providing them with a broader and clearer picture of where their countrymate colonizers served. He is also known because of "[his 1882-] three-volume magnum opus 'Java, Geographical, Ethnographical and Historical' (Java, Geographisch, Ethnographisch, Historisch) consisting of approximately three thousand pages".[4]

I am glad that I finally got a chance to translate his essay, which could be a suitable supplement to my earlier commentary on Helfrich's report. Nonetheless, two points outlined in Veth's response are worthy of note. The first deals with his application of Eduard Douwes Dekker's, also known as Multatuli (the author of *Max Havelaar*), term *Insulindia* to address the East-Indies. Second, Veth is a pioneer who, to my knowledge, coined the term "Persian-Shīʿism" within the context of Malay Islam and Indonesian Shīʿism (see his note below). I admit that I was not aware of Veth's invention while writing "The Study of Persian Shiʿism in the Malay-Indonesian World"[5] in 2014 but I emphasise that "Persian-Shīʿism" has a much broader meaning for me; it is not limited to a particular language (*Pārsī*) but is linked with the in/direct (spoken or unspoken) influence of Persian people (*Pārsī-hā/Pārsiān/Iranians*), culture, arts and thought on Nusantara. Besides, Veth reminds an important issue: whether Javanese fasting on the day of ʿĀshūrāʾ is rooted in a Jewish tradition. A question which has the potential to invite us to reexamine whether Malay Islam is inspired by different sorts of traditions.

Translation

P. J. Veth, 'Opmerkingen naar aanleiding van het opstel, Hat Ḥassan-Ḥusayn of Taboetfeest te Benkoelen', *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie* I (1888), 230–233
(Some Comments on the essay 'Het Hasan-Hosein of Taboet-feest te Bengkoelen')

*Translator's note: all additional points are positioned in square brackets.

Respected Editor,
I have read with a great interest an essay on the Shīʿī feast of ʿĀshūrāʾ in parts of Sumatra's West coast, particularly in Bengkulu in the last issue of your *Archive*. What has been published was not already

[4] More on Veth: Paul. van de Velde, *A Life-Long Passion: PJ Veth (1814–1895) and the Dutch East Indies* (Leiden: Brill, 2006). Also see: Paul van der Velde and Jan Just Witkam, *Nederlands-Indië op papier; de wetenschappelijke beschrijving van de archipel door P. J. Veth (1814–1895) en enkelen van zijn tijdgenoten in boeken, prenten, foto's, kaarten en brieven* (Leiden: Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden 1995). I thank Jan Just Witkam for introducing the latter source.

[5] Majid Daneshgar, "The Study of Persian Shi'ism in the Malay-Indonesian world: A Review of Literature from the Nineteenth Century onwards," *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2014): 191–229.

unknown,[6] however, the article of your *Archive* entitled "Het Hasan-Hosein of Taboet-feest te Bengkoelen" ('The Ḥassan-Ḥusayn, or Tabut Feast at Bengkulu')[7] is the first precise description of this feast, while it derives special value from related legends. A few more words could have been said about the *Tabut*, the tombs adorned with artificial flowers and various jewels offered to Ḥassan and Ḥusayn that would be finally thrown into the river during the feast. The added commentary: "the term Tabut is understood by the descendants of Nastal in Bengkulu as a tower or pyramid-shaped little house," is sort of incomplete. Those who consult the cited English works[8] will certainly find therein everything he needs to understand the role of "houses" in the feast, but one may ask if all the readers of the *Archive*, who may not all be specialists of Mohammedan religion, have read or access to those books? Also a point of the article that shocked me is that the term "East-Indies" is applied within a context that is contrary to what is commonly used. In the beginning of the essay, the "East-Indies" is given as Hindustan and as a synonym for the *Indian Archipelago*, *Indonesia* or *Insulinde*. If it were a new expression and not one that had been common for a few years, then it would not be possible to reject it; as if one considers Indian islands as part of the Indies, it forms the easternmost part of it. But in our language, the East-Indies have always been used in contrast to the West-Indies, which were to be found in America. Therefore, both the East and Further India and the Archipelago were understood in the name of the East-Indies. Nonetheless, is it at all a good thing to give a name to the Archipelago through which it is entirely identified as part of the India?

Since it both geologically and ethnologically consists of two quite separated parts, which have only a kind of geographic unity as an island complex between the continents of Asia and Australia, I would then prefer a term that includes the concept of "Islands-world", without any addition. That is why I like to use the name *Insulindia* coined by Douwes Dekker without any intention to impose it on someone. The objections raised against this name are based on a sort of misunderstanding; at least I always meant that the word of *insula*, ending with *inde*, which occurs so often, especially in poetry as well as in female names, such as Clorinde, Lucinde, Hermesinde, Adozinde, Rosalinde etc., does not carry any disturbing meaning. If the inventor of that name, which I cannot definitely deny, had alluded to India, he

[6] See "Gatalogus der Afdeeling Nederlandsche Koloniën van de Koloniale Tentoonstelling te Amsterdam in 1883", Group H, p. 338.

[7] [O. L., Helfrich, W. R. Winter, and D. M. J. Schiff, 'Het Ḥassan-Ḥusayn of Taboet-feest te Bengkoelen' ('Ḥassan-Ḥusayn or Tabut Celebration in Bengkulu'), in *Internationales Archivfür Ethnographie* I (1888), 191–96]

[8] [The author, Veth, means: " M. D. G. A. Herklots, *Qanoon-e-Islam, or the Customs of the Mussulmans of India, with Several Illustrations*, 2nd ed. (Madras: n.p., 1863), 112ff. Reverend T. P. Hughes, *Notes on Muḥammadanism*, 2nd ed. (London: W. H. Allen, 1877), 163ff. Reverend Edward Sell, The Faith of Islam (London: Trübner & Co, 1880), 241ff. Th. P. Hughes, *A Dictionary of Islam: Being a Cyclopaedia of the Doctrines, Rites, Ceremonies, and Customs, Together with the Technical and Theological terms, of the Muḥammadan religion: With Numerous Illustrations* (London: W. H. Allen, 1885)"].

would then, I think, have written it as *Insulindië* or *Insulindia*.

But I am straying from the subject. The purpose of my letter is primarily to indicate that the statements made by Mr. Helfrich c. s. that: "In the East-Indies the Muḥammadans in some areas make a special food on the day of Ashura. Unusual customs, as told in the mentioned accounts, are only to be found in Bengkulu, Krui, and here and there on the Sumatran west coast", perhaps unintentionally, conveys this [wrong] impression that the dish of boeboer (*bubur*/porridge) made at ʿĀshūrāʾ is the only trace of this festival outside of Sumatra in the Archipelago. At least as far as Java is concerned, this would certainly not be correct.

Perhaps you want to open a space in your "Short Notes and Correspondence" with the brief statement of reasons that remind me that once the "ʿĀshūrāʾ day" was celebrated there as a great and important feast, however, little of that feast might be left today. The months of the Mohammedan year are preserved in Java, though with a slightly modified pronunciation of their Arabic names. Only those months that have special significance for the feast sequence are usually called by other names derived from that meaning. Thus the third month [*Rabīʿ al-Awwal*] is called *Sasi maulud* after the *mualud* festival, [referring to] the commemoration of Muḥammad's birth; the eighth month [*Shaʿbān*] as *Sasi ruwah*, the month of spirits, as dedicated to the memory of the departed ancestors; the ninth month [Ramaḍān] as *Sasi puwôsô* or *Sasi pôsô*, a month for the great fast, which based on Muḥammad's later provision is the only obligatory and general [time of fasting], which replaced the fasting on the ʿĀshūrāʾ day; the eleventh month [Dhū l-Qaʿda] as *Sasi sèlô*, because it is placed between two great festive months; and the twelfth month [Dhū l-Ḥijja] *Sasi besar*, because it is the month of the great sacrifice feast, the *garebeg besar*.

As now the first month or Muḥarram is usually called *Sasi soerô*, the month of the ʿĀshūrāʾ feast, it already seems to me that it obviously refers to the day or rather those days (all the first ten days of Muḥarram are more or less associated with the ʿĀshūrāʾ feast) which must have taken up an important position in the feast sequences. [9]

When Muḥammad abolished the obligation of fasting on the ʿĀshūrāʾ day (originally the great Day of Atonement [Yom Kippur] of the Jews), he allowed yet voluntary fasting, as well as giving alms, [a custom] which was used by Jews on the days of Tishri [Tishrei] prior to the Day of Atonement, and which has remained popular among the more stringent Muslims. In my work on Java, Vol. I. p. 397, I listed the days on which Muslims are voluntarily eligible for fasting,

[9] No doubt that *Soerô* comes from ʿĀshūrāʾ. The Arabic ش (*sj* or *sch*) is always used by Javanese as "s". The first letter of ʿĀshūrāʾ, ع, which Javanese, like us, cannot pronounce gets soft and completely vanished. The Javanese do not recognize the origin of the name *Soerô* when they call the *soeran* feast, that is the abbreviated form of the [original] month. [Asjoera-feest (Jav. Soera, soeran): see *Regeeringsalmanak voor Nederlandsch-Indie* (1904), 25].

whereby I assumed, though I did not explicitly state it with certainty, that these are also upheld by the more stringent people of Java. In his notes on my work ("Bijbladen bij het Tijdschr. v. h. Aardr. Gen." Vol. III, no. 7, p. 9), the Regent of Brebes [10] has clearly stated that fasting on the white days was not known in Central Java, therefore it indirectly confirms that the fasting actually took place during the ʿĀshūrāʾ festival.

Concerning the preparation of a special food or delicacy during the Muḥarram feast, that I found mentioned many times to be popular on Java, deserves a few more words. Lane mentions the existence of such customs in Egypt, and says that they are based on a related tradition of the Prophet, which reads: "Whose giveth plenty to his household on the day of 'Ashoora, God will bestow plenty upon him throughout the remaining days of his life." [11] The Javanese custom is in agreement with this, although the food itself is probably quite different. Winter in "Instellingen, gewoonten en gebruiken der Javanen te Soerakarta" [Institutions, manners and customs of the Javanese in Surakarta] [12] says: "In the month of Soerô, the first of the year, an offer is dedicated to the brothers, Ḥassan and Ḥusayn, the grandsons of Muḥammed. This offer is usually given on the eighth of the reported month, but it may also be held on other days during that month."

POENSEN in "Bijdragen tot de kennis van den godsd. en zedel. toest. der Javanen" [13] also speaks about this offering in the month of Soerô, which according to him (based on the Jav. Glossary of Prof. ROOEDA) is called *njoerô* or *neteppi Soerô* (i.e., to perform Soerô). "The offering" he says, "consists of boeboerlemoe (thick paste [porridge]), which should be served for the guests." The positions of WINTER and POENSEN support and clarify each other.

It turns out that the ʿĀshūrāʾ offering is essentially a common *sidekah*, that is commemorated on many occasions by Javanese. The *sidekah* is a thanksgiving, which always consists of a guest meal (*slamettan*) [14], from which gifts and charity are also segregated. The word is a corrupted form of the Arabic, *tsadaqah* [15] , i.e., everything that is given for God's will, and therefore alms. If on Java small donations of money are also given to children at the ʿĀshūrāʾ feast, as is done in Egypt[16], is not clear to me.

I think it is very likely that *dhikir*s (*dhikr*) in honor of Ḥassan and Ḥusayn on the occasion of the ʿĀshūrāʾ festival are held on Java, but I have not found any record of this; however, I came across clues referring to sacred

[10] [According to Paul van der Velde: "Veth's Java also engendered a dialogue with the ruler of Brebes, who had especially praised Veth for the second volume of Java because for the first time Indonesian history was treated from an Indonesian perspective instead of from the perspective of the colonial ruler."] See: http://www.paulvandervelde.nl/english/

[11] [see Lan, *Modern Egyptians*, 1871, p. 149]

[12] T. V. N. I. Jg. V, Vol. I, p. 719.

[13] In "Mededeelingen van wege het Ned. Zendelinggen" X, p. 41.

[14] [*slametan*]

[15] [*ṣadaqa*]

[16] Zie Lane, t. a. p., p. 427, 428.

parades or processions. In the "Catalogus der ethnologische afdeeling van het Museum van het Bataviaasch Genootschap" [17] a lantern is mentioned which has artificial flowers, as used to be carried around on the occasion of the ʿĀshūrā' or Ḥassan-Ḥusayn feast. It is added that the feast is rarely celebrated on Java anymore. This point should not be applied to common *sidekah*'s as mentioned above, but probably refers to the more excessive festivities which occurred in earlier times.

It is not at all unlikely that in those times the ʿĀshūrā' celebration, under Persian influence, had more Shīʿī characteristics. We know very little about the earlier history and development of Islam in the Indian Archipelago; but that a Persian-Shīʿī vein runs through it can be recognized in the many traces it has left behind. For many years I have already pointed this out in the "Tijdschrift voor Ned. Indie". [18]

One would find much more and research, such as into the list of Javanese words from Persian, given by Prof. dr. JUYNBOLL (*Bijdragen van het Instituât voor Taal- Land- en Volkenkunde van N. I.*) the extraordinary edition published at the Orientalist Congress in Leiden {dept. Language and Literature, p. 46), can be helpful. An interesting example is that on Java the common ablution before prayer is indicated equally with the Persian-derived *abdas* (for *âbdast*) [19] as with the Arabic-derived *woeloe* [from *wuḍū'*].

Islam on Java seems to have, due to the increasing knowledge of its principles and the influence of the Arabs, at least as far as public worship is concerned, become more and more purified from heretical additives, and it is probably why the ʿĀshūrā' feast has lost much of its previous status.

The ʿĀshūrā' feast with its diverse celebration and ceremonies is still in many ways a great puzzle. It could provide materials for an important monograph that would allow us to have a deep look within the various strands of transmission and mysticism in the Mohammedan world.

No European scholar has studied it so much and penetrated it as deeply as Dr. SNOUCK HURERONJE [HURGRONJE], who, although he provided his help for the drafting of the essay discussed here, apparently did not want to change or add anything to the content, perhaps precisely because he plans to devote a special study to this feast.

From no other pen than his would we welcome a full history and clarification of this.

ARNHEM 10 Oct. 1888. P. J. Veth.

[17] 2nd edition, p. 101, no. 340; [of Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen Museum]

[18] 1868, II, p. 348, vv. However, the *sidekah*s were incorrectly attributed to Ḥassan and Ḥusayn, although they are entirely orthodox.

[19] [also known as: *mutawaḍḍā*; see *Dehkhoda* Dictionary]

Article

The 2020 Singapore General Elections: Moving Away from a One-Party-Dominant State

Kay Key Teo

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Introduction

On 10 July 2020, Singapore went to the polls. The election, set against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, had been touted as a necessary one by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). The government, argued Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, required a "strong mandate" (Ho, 2020) to lead the country out of the impending crisis.

Before Polling Day, there were many discussions by political observers on possible results (M. Tan, 2020). One camp predicted a full defeat for the opposition parties, a flight to safety fueled by fears of economic and social implications that the pandemic could bring (Han, 2020; Ng, 2020). Meanwhile, criticism of the government's handling of the pandemic after a positive start, other earlier policy issues, together with the opposition's strong slate of candidates, gave rise to many hotly contested seats (Toh, 2020).

In the end, the PAP won 61.23% of the overall vote share, much lower than the 69.86% won in 2015, while the opposition Workers' Party (WP) won four more seats to hold ten – out of a total of 93 – seats in Parliament. I suggest that while the lowered vote share reflects lowered citizen evaluations of the PAP, the increase in the WP's seats is significant symbolically but insufficient to usher in a second effective political party.

Lower vote share, lowered support

Chua (2017) has pointed out that, from the PAP's perspective, the elected government is seen as trustees of the citizens. Once elected, the government delivers good and effective governance to the entire population, even people who had voted against the ruling party. Meanwhile, literature on voting behavior has indicated that voters are likely to factor their evaluation of the incumbent government into their voting decisions (Greene, 2020; Plescia and Kritzinger, 2017; Gidengil et al, 2001; Zelle, 1995).

In Singapore, the social contract between the PAP and citizens has been built upon the delivery of material promises like affordable living costs, a safe country (Chin, 2016), and social mobility (Rahim and Barr, 2019, p. 1). If citizens still believe that contract terms are being met, the PAP is likely to remain in power. However, many of these points, particularly affordable living costs and social mobility, have become subject to some debate in recent years. With the economy already starting to feel the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, most contesting political parties also set their focus on creating and securing jobs for Singaporeans. The 2020 results appear to be lower than expected, given that the PAP used the more conservative "clear mandate" (Sim, 2020)

instead of the earlier "strong mandate" to describe it. It is also the second-lowest vote share obtained by the ruling party in the last two decades. From both the perspective of the citizen and the ruling party, therefore, the PAP's lowered vote share points to a lower evaluation of the incumbent.

An examination of overall trends on the PAP's vote share reveals volatility in voter support, changing in tandem with sentiments about the government. In the last two decades, the vote share has dropped from a high of 75.3% in 2001 to 66.6% in 2006, then 60.1% in 2011, before rebounding to 69.9% in 2015 and then decreasing to 60.2% in 2020. In particular, the rebound of the PAP's vote share between 2011 and 2015 had been a surprise to many, given that several analysts (e.g. Ortmann, 2012; Slater, 2012, K.P. Tan, 2014) had expected, or at least entertained, the possibility that Singapore would slowly gain more characteristics of a liberal democracy after the bruising 2011 results, with K.P. Tan (2016) even labelling his 2015 conclusion about Singapore edging towards liberal democracy as premature. Therefore, if the PAP can convince voters that they are keeping up their end of the social contract, voter sentiments may well rebound in the next election.

Parliamentary control remains

In terms of parliamentary seats, the impact of the loss of a second GRC to the Workers' Party is arguably more symbolic than substantive. The number of WP-held seats has increased from five to ten, but it is accompanied by an increase in the total number of elected seats, with the PAP holding one more seat than before. While the PAP's proportion of seats in parliament has dropped from 93.3% to 89.2% after the elections, it is still much higher than 66.7%, or two-thirds, and above the actual vote share won by the PAP. Therefore, the increased number of elected opposition MPs does not immediately indicate a substantive lowering of the PAP's parliamentary dominance.

This disproportionality, according to literature on electoral systems, is an effect of the design. The electoral system in Singapore follows the first-past-the-post (FPTP) rule, in which the contesting party with the highest vote share wins the constituency. FPTP electoral systems have been shown to be more likely than proportional representation systems to disproportionately increase seat shares of the largest parties (Birch, 2007; Blais and Carty, 1987). Furthermore, Singapore has a mixture of single-member and multi-member constituencies, all of which are contested separately by designated political party candidates. It is therefore not surprising to see that the country has been found to have a high level of disproportionality between vote share and seat share (N. Tan, 2013, p. 637).

Therefore, just like how the shock win of a GRC in the 2011 elections by an opposition party has been described as a "psychological breakthrough for challengers" (K.P. Tan, 2014, p. 378), the same likely applies to this second GRC win in 2020. This time, however, it is not just about winning more seats, but also about the establishment of a

second Town Council by an opposition party.

This is especially significant especially because the WP's first multi-ward Town Council, the former Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council (AHPETC) was flagged for inconsistencies in fund management and corporate governance in 2012 and 2013, leading to an audit by the Auditor-General's Office in 2015 and a civil suit which found three WP members liable in 2019 [20] (CNA, 2019). This term is therefore crucial for the WP to prove its administrative mettle, as effectively running two Town Councils without major missteps will improve their credibility in the eyes of citizens and perhaps lead to more votes or seats. In the current term, however, the PAP's stronghold on parliament remains intact.

Conclusion

Examining the results from these two angles produce slightly different predictions about the PAP's retention of governing control. What this suggests is that it might still be early days yet for a full transition from a one-party-dominant state to having two effective political parties.

The opposition parties have made major strides in the last few elections, gathering enough resources to contest all constituencies, attracting credible candidates, and producing fuller manifestos with detailed policy proposals [21]. These changes indicate the potential for Singapore politics to become more vibrant. However, such predictions need to be tempered with an understanding of the local population. Politics take up a very small part of most citizens' lives. There is a strong societal focus on economic wealth and an education that concentrates on training students to become career ready. Furthermore, politics and society are given minimal attention in compulsory education, with political diversity and change "portrayed as antithetical to economic development, the primary focus of society" (K.K Teo, 2020, p. 296).

Furthermore, Singaporeans see the ruling party's approach to nation-building as "the most logical, practical, and proven course of action for Singapore's economic survival and security" (Velayutham, 2007, pp.182-183), and view the state as "an imperfect and yet necessary agent, operating in a global context under conditions beyond its control, and with intentions that are aimed at a greater good" (Y. Teo 2010, p. 343). Therefore, there will be a strong bias amongst the citizenry towards retaining the political status quo.

At this point, the status quo will still be able to deliver most of the elements of the social contract expected by Singaporeans. While there are signs from GE 2020 that the government's performance has not fully met expectations for some, I caution against using the results as strong evidence for the ruling party's decline for three reasons:

[20] The plaintiff attempted in August 2020 to revise its claims against the three defendants (Lam, 2020), but there has been no follow-up on the issue at the time of writing.

[21] The WP and Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), in particular, have detailed policy proposals in their GE 2020 manifestos.

Parliament is still held firmly in PAP hands, substantial citizen support for PAP remains, and opposition parties have yet to prove their governing worth.

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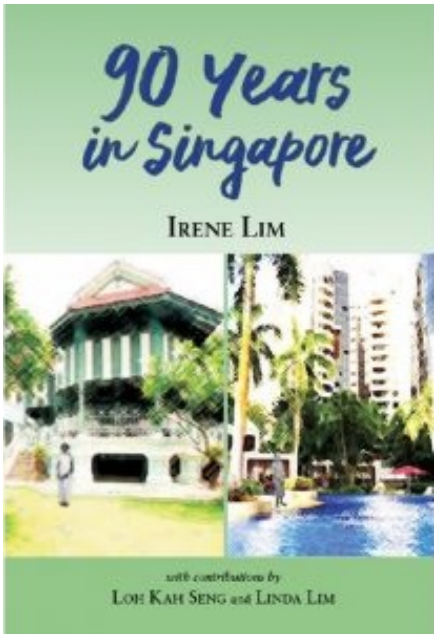
Dr Teo Kay Key is a Postdoctoral Fellow at IPS Social Lab the Institute of Policy Studies. She has a PhD in Political Science from the National University of Singapore (NUS). Her research interests are in political and social attitudes, public opinion, voting behavior, and Singapore society. She is interested in examining these topics using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. Her current projects examine a myriad of issues in Singapore, including attitudes towards the family, social norms and values, and national identity.

Book Review

90 Years in Singapore

Irene Lim



Review by Margaret Sarkissian
Smith College, United States

Irene Lim's *90 Years in Singapore* is the latest addition to the treasure trove of personal memoirs published by elderly (mostly Straits) Chinese from Singapore and Malaysia. Like other examples of the genre, this gently nostalgic account provides a fascinating window into a world that has all but disappeared, a world that spans the transition from the end of the British colonial era, through World War II and the Japanese Occupation, to Singapore's high-rise, hi-tech present.

As Loh Kah Seng makes clear in his Prologue, Lim's book is "a small Singapore story," a "micro-narrative [that] offers a glimpse of Singapore from the perspective of an ordinary Singaporean" (p. 1). This is true, but what makes it so valuable is that it is a story told from the perspective of an ordinary Singaporean *woman*. This becomes clear when comparing *90 Years in Singapore* with two other well-known memoirs by contemporaneous Singaporeans: Lee Kip Lee's *Amber Sands: A Boyhood Memoir* (1995) and William Gwee Thian Hock's *A Baba Boyhood: Growing Up During World War 2* (2013). Born halfway between the two – Lee (1922), Lim (1927), and Gwee (1934) – it is Lim's gendered experience that makes her voice distinct.

90 Years in Singapore combines the author's memories and observations with family lore that is sometimes partial and occasionally wide of the historical record. It is written in plain language that on balance outweighs the moments when unconscious biases of her time and social station rise to the surface. Irene's prodigious memory for detail can, at times, seem overwhelming to readers who are neither family nor old friends. For the rest of us, the book is like an iceberg: its magnitude lies beneath the surface. For this reason, it is worth beginning with the short Epilogue written by Irene's middle daughter Linda, herself now professor emerita at the University of Michigan. "The Social Significance of a Life" (pp. 216-28) contextualizes Irene's story admirably and provides multiple entry points for individual readers. Students

of Peranakan identity, for example, will recognize its complexity in Irene's frank admission: "People often ask me if I am Peranakan. I don't really know how to answer, since we were not 'pure' Peranakan in food, dress or language use" (p. 18). That said, anyone curious about Peranakan food in general and Nonya cakes in particular, will find Irene's descriptions appetizing. Readers interested in changing class dynamics in Singapore will be engrossed by her frequently frustrated yet often touching interactions with a procession of cooks, housemaids, and gardeners. For me, however, three broad themes stand out: the presence of strong women in a landscape defined by men; the cause and effect of gender expectations on women's life choices; and the crucial importance of place as a locus of memory.

A legacy of strong women

Only three men feature prominently in Lim's account: her maternal grandfather, Kung Tian Siong (T.S. Kung, 1876-1958); her father, Ooi Chor Hooi (R.B. Ooi, 1905-72); and her husband, Lim Hee Seng (1915-89). Of these, only Hee Seng did not disappoint throughout what seems to have been a long and happy marriage. Grandfather Kung, "always properly dressed in three-piece Saville Row suits" (p. 14), may have been a "pioneer in the cinema industry," hotelier, and goldmine owner, but his success – likely built on capital from his wealthy second wife (p. 16) – and fortune had dissipated by the early 1930s. Father R.B. Ooi was a journalist and newspaperman of some renown. Portrayed by Irene as fussy about food and clothes, he constantly uprooted the family in his search for "the ideal place to live (p. 21). Both men abandoned their wives and children in traumatic times, T.S. in 1911 (when he went to China briefly to join the Republican Revolution) and R.B. during World War II. It was the strong and independent-minded women who ensured that their families survived.

On Irene's paternal side were two traditional, non-Christian Chinese matriarchs, great-great-grandmother Saw Kim Lian (c. 1842-1931) and grandmother, Tor Siew Gek (1890-1942). Both were locally born daughters of wealthy families (from Balik Pulau, Penang, and Sungei Bakap in Province Wellesley, respectively) who managed the Ooi family coconut plantations and finances without the benefit of formal education. Saw Kim Lian, a "most formidable lady" (p. 89), outlived her husband and son and controlled the family into her late eighties. She was succeeded directly by Tor Siew Gek who had married Saw Kim Lian's pampered grandson (R.B.'s father) when she was 15. This equally formidable lady taught herself to read by studying the Chinese almanac and still led the family when Irene reached Bukit Mertajam at the start of the Japanese Occupation.

On her maternal side, the women were English-educated and Christian. Grandmother, Siauw Mah Lee (1880-1936), was born in Medan, Sumatra, and sent to Singapore by her Chinese businessman father to receive an education at Sophia Blackmore's Methodist Girls' School. She met her future husband, the Anglo-Chinese School-educated T.S. Kung, at church.

When she was sent to Ipoh and abandoned in 1911, Mah Lee supported her extended family (three daughters, a sister-in-law, and her sister-in-law's children) by teaching at the local MGS. Despite remarrying and making a new life there, Mah Lee sent her Kung daughters back to Sophia Blackmore's school in Singapore. Irene's mother, Edna Kung Gek Neo (1910-2003), finished her school-leaving exam at 14 and began a nursing course in Seremban. She was unable to finish because T.S., now remarried and impatient to get his youngest daughter off his hands, married her off to R.B. Ooi shortly before her 15th birthday. R.B. didn't want his wife to work as a nurse, so Edna studied shorthand and – unusually for her time – "continued to work, as a fashion journalist, a secretary, a private tutor, and a nurse, even throughout the Japanese Occupation, both in Singapore and Penang" (p. 11). This ability to support herself and her children gave Edna a measure of autonomy during the Occupation such that she divorced R.B., remarried, and later returned to Singapore with new husband and daughter, Irene's half-sister Vivien.

Gender expectations and life choices

Irene inherited and was poised to extend this tradition of strong, educated women. She started school in 1934, not at the MGS like her grandmother and mother before her, but at the Raffles Girls' School, "because [Father] wished me to learn to speak 'proper' English" (p. 59). Her school years were clearly formative, embedding her in a social network that remained strong throughout her life. Her account of every teacher and fellow student powerfully illustrates the racial and class hierarchies of her world. Caring for elderly teachers in reduced circumstances, connections maintained across the globe as careers and families proliferated, reunions whenever an "old girl" returned to town are all experiences familiar to those who attended British schools anywhere in the colonies.

Irene's education ended abruptly in December 1941 when RGS was closed as the city prepared for war. The family embarked on a three-year sojourn away from Occupied Singapore, first at the Ooi family estate in Bukit Mertajam and later in Penang as Edna struck out on her own. For 14-year-old Irene, this new world was full of gendered domestic responsibilities. As the oldest of Edna Kung and R.B. Ooi's four children, she was expected to pull her weight within the extended family. She learned the labor-intensive fundamentals of Nonya cuisine from her Aunt Ah Khoo, collected fruits and coconuts from what was left of the estate, and sold them to contribute to the family coffers. She was also expected to care for her younger siblings, which included supervising their education: "I tried to teach them as much as I could and made sure they learnt to read well" (p. 106).

With her parents separated and mother remarried, Irene's responsibility for her siblings reshaped the course of her own postwar life. She took them back to Singapore, got them readmitted to school, and although she intended to restart her own education, quickly "found it too much to have to cook, go to school, keep our room neat and make ends meet on the

allowance I was given… so I decided without my parent's knowledge to get a job" (p. 112). She studied shorthand and had a number of jobs until she met and married Lim Hee Seng in 1948, shortly before her 21st birthday. At this point – unlike most of her career-oriented RGS cohort – Irene became a different type of strong woman: a home maker. The second half of the book provides a window into the domestic life of one woman in postwar, post-Independence, developing Singapore. Irene's upper-middle-class nuclear family life now revolved around church events, her children's school and extra-curricular activities, the social world she shared with her accountant husband, and the ups and downs of running a household with domestic servants. Irene never finished school herself, but her belief in the importance of education remained undimmed. All three daughters followed her maternal line and attended MGS, all three went to college, and the younger two both received PhDs.

A story of place: 90 years in Singapore

So many of Irene's recollections are intimately tied to place, to each house and neighborhood in which she lived, to the visits made, and the food prepared or consumed therein. This sensitivity to place is crucial for, as the book's title suggests, the object of her gaze is the city itself. Irene's life story powerfully illustrates the changes that have occurred in Singapore over the last 90 years.

Her early years were marked by constant upheaval caused by her father's endless search for "a healthy environment" (p. 21). We follow her around the island as she describes all types of dwellings – a flat above an office, terraced row houses, semi-detached homes, colonial bungalows with wrap-around verandahs – in multiple locations around the city as well as by the seaside and in rural areas. Ten different homes between the early 1930s and 1941 must have been stressful for Edna in particular. From a child's perspective, however, home was like a kaleidoscope with a constantly changing cast of colorful characters – neighbors, trishaw drivers, street hawkers, and Bibiks (old Nonya ladies) who dropped by or were visited. A highlight of their equally peripatetic three-year sojourn in the north is Irene's description of the Ooi residence in Bukit Mertajam with its multiple hallways, ancestral tablets, interior air wells, and other common features of Straits Chinese homes.

After their marriage, Irene and Hee Seng established firm roots in homes of their own, even as the built landscape around them changed dramatically. Irene's account reflects in great detail their upper-middle-class lifestyle: two cars, family dogs, ready-made clothes for the girls, Cold Storage, problems with domestic servants, vacations, etc. In affluent areas like theirs, "houses were apart from each other, surrounded by big gardens, thick hedges and trees, [so] neighbors did not really see or know one another" (p. 171), while on the peripheries, low-rise flats and HDB estates were beginning to proliferate. The social landscape was also changing: the importance of "visiting," so pervasive in Irene's childhood, was replaced by "travel,"

at first family road trips to Malaysia, later increasingly global international travel.

After their daughters grew up and left home, Irene and Hee Seng (like so many other Singaporeans) opted for the convenience and simplicity of high-rise living. They moved into Hilton Tower, "the first high-rise private flat apartment building, built in the early 1970s" (p. 188), as they began to "downsize." Irene, widowed now for over 30 years, has continued to live independently in centrally located apartment buildings.

A final thought: silences and absences

There is so much rich texture in Irene Lim's story, yet the silences are intriguing. There are many topics she avoids, including those that appear to conflict with her Methodist faith and personal moral landscape. For example, she mentions the existence of mistresses, broken marriages, and abandoned families, yet is silent about the deeper emotional scars these may have caused. Silences lead to absences: Grandmother Mah Lee all but disappears after resettling in Ipoh; Father R.B. is rarely mentioned after the War, though it turns out he had a lengthy public career in Kuala Lumpur; mother Edna becomes less visible after her remarriage; Irene's step-father and half-sister Vivien are barely mentioned; we only discover much later that sister Violet – no longer counted in "the family" by 1948 (p. 120) – had emigrated to England with her second husband; and even brother Eric only reappears from Kuala Lumpur with his Muslim wife and large family towards the end of the book. Some of these mysteries can be resolved by triangulating with daughter Linda Lim's family history (Lim 2013).

I close with the image of Irene Lim looking out over the city as she emails and WhatsApps her way into the second decade of the 21st century. There are undoubtedly things that this upper-middle-class woman simply does not see. That is not the point. *90 Years in Singapore* rewards the careful reader with an unparalleled window into the lived experience of one extra-ordinary Singaporean woman.

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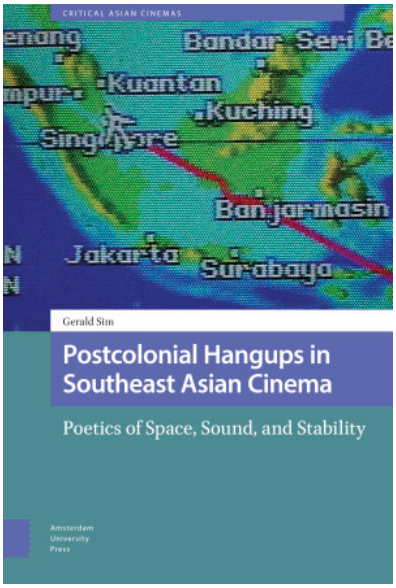
Publications

Postcolonial Hangups in Southeast Asian Cinema: Poetics of Space, Sound, and Stability

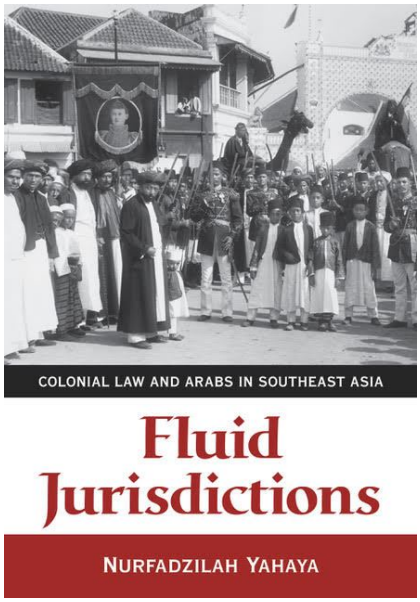
Gerald Sim



Postcolonial Hangups in Southeast Asian Cinema: Poetics of Space, Sound, and Stability explores a geopolitically situated set of cultures negotiating unique relationships to colonial history. Singaporean, Malaysian, and Indonesian identities are discussed through a variety of commercial films, art cinema, and experimental work. The book discovers instances of post coloniality that manifest stylistically through Singapore's preoccupations with space, the importance of sound to Malay culture, and the Indonesian investment in genre.

Fluid Jurisdictions: Colonial Law and Arabs in Southeast Asia

Nurfadzilah Yahaya



This wide-ranging, geographically ambitious book tells the story of the Arab diaspora within the context of British and Dutch colonialism, unpacking the community's ambiguous embrace of European colonial authority in Southeast Asia. In *Fluid Jurisdictions*, Yahaya looks at colonial legal infrastructure – discussing how it impacted, and was impacted by, Islam and ethnicity. But more importantly, Yahaya follows the actors who used this framework to advance their particular interests.

Yahaya explains why Arab minorities in the region helped to fuel the entrenchment of European colonial legalities: their itinerant

lives made institutional records necessary. Securely stored in centralized repositories, such records could be presented as evidence in legal disputes. In order to ensure accountability down the line, Arab merchants valued notarial attestation land deeds, inheritance papers, and marriage certificates by recognized state officials. Colonial subjects continually played one jurisdiction against another, sometimes preferring that colonial legal authorities administer Islamic law—even against fellow Muslims.

Fluid Jurisdictions draws on lively material from multiple international archives to demonstrate the interplay between colonial projections of order and their realities, Arab navigation of legally plural systems in Southeast Asia and beyond, and the fraught and deeply human struggles that played themselves out between family, religious, contract, and commercial legal orders.

Dominik Müller and Timea Greta Biro

Published an entry on "Malaysia" in the Encyclopedia of Islam THREE (Brill). Available: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_40314

Job Opportunities

Pembroke College, Cambridge University

Harry F. Guggenheim Research Fellowship: Contemporary Issues of Violence – Three-year postdoctoral fellowship

The College intends to elect to a Harry F. Guggenheim Research Fellowship, with appointment from 1 October 2021. Candidates for the Research Fellowship should have recently completed or be about to complete a doctoral degree, and should be able to conduct research of outstanding quality in areas that can illuminate or respond to contemporary issues of violence, from within the disciplines of History, Human, Social and Political Sciences and aligned fields. The duration of the Fellowship will be for three years. Like all Pembroke Research Fellows, the holder will be expected to do a limited amount of teaching for the College but would require the permission of the Governing Body to undertake other paid work. The stipend will be fixed within the University scale according to age and experience, and in the range £23,754 - £26,715: this will be subject to any revisions of stipends taking place between now and 1 October 2021.
Research Fellows are offered subsidized accommodation, in College or in College-owned flats or houses; where accommodation is not required a generous housing allowance is made available and the Fellow will be provided with a study in

College. The Fellowship will carry full dining rights in College, and access to additional grants to support research activities; and the Fellow will be a member of the governing body of the College.

Applications, which are required by 16 October 2020, should be made online at https://app.casc.cam.ac.uk/fas_live/guggenheim.aspx.

Informal enquiries can be made to the Senior Tutor's Assistant, Sally Clowes, at sally.clowes@pem.cam.ac.uk.

The University of Edinburgh

Alwaleed Early Career Teaching and Research Fellow: Muslim Societies in Southeast Asia

The Alwaleed Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World at the University of Edinburgh seeks to appoint a Fellow in Contemporary Muslim societies in Southeast Asia for a January 2021 start.
The Fellow will conduct research in connection to Islamist political actors and/or Muslim movements in contemporary Southeast Asia. Applications are particularly welcome from candidates who demonstrate expertise in conducting comparative research in different countries and who engage with the wider international/transnational dynamics of the Muslim world.
The Fellow will undertake course organization and teaching as part of a new MSc program on the Globalized Muslim World which is scheduled to run for the first time in the 2021/22 academic year.
The Fellow will also develop her/his own research on contemporary Muslim societies in Southeast Asia and contribute directly to the research activities and outreach program of the Alwaleed Centre.
This is a full-time position, on a 2-year fixed-term non-renewable basis. This post would be ideal for a recent PhD graduate. The purpose of this post is to provide a career opportunity for a person recently qualified to PhD level in a relevant subject. Therefore, the contract is limited to 2 years.
Salary scale is Grade UE07, £33,797 to £40,322 per annum. Closing date: 5pm (GMT) on 7th October 2020

Informal queries can be emailed for the attention of Mr. Tom Lea, Alwaleed Centre General Manager,
to llc.recruitment@ed.ac.uk.

Further Information:
https://www.ed.ac.uk/literatures-languages-cultures/alwaleed/join-our-team/se-asia-research-fellow?fbclid=IwAR0AsHzAM4Wg38O1qQrgZrofGm0EWjk7YH8YBcNWeXLiFwPV9sDw3OaQT0k

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SOAS London is seeking to appoint a Post-Doctoral Researcher (PDR) in Islamic Manuscripts of Sumatra to contribute full time for three years on the Leverhulme Research Leadership Award project, "Mapping Sumatra's Manuscript Cultures."

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Specific questions may be sent to Prof. Lisa Balabanlilar, Chair of the Department of Transnational Asian Studies, at Balabanlilar@rice.edu

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